

Aunt Jose Rivadeneira

Had a Daughter with Big Eyes

Angeles Mastretta*

Aunt Jose Rivadeneira had a daughter with big eyes, eyes like two moons, like a wish. The child had just been placed in her mother's embrace, still set and faltering, when she showed her eyes and something on the wings of her lips that resembled a question.

"What do you want to know?" asked Aunt Jose playfully pretending she understood the child's expression.

As every mother does, aunt Jose thought there was no creature as beautiful as hers in the history of the world. She was dazzled by the color of her skin, the length of her eyelashes and the peacefulness of her sleep. She trembled with pride while imagining what she would do with blood and chimeras beating in her body.

She devoted herself to gazing at the child with pride and delight for more than three weeks. Then, life unassailable had a sickness fall upon the girl that within five hours turned her extraordinary liveliness into an

exhausted and remote dream that seemed to carry her back to death.

When all her healing talents could not succeed in improving the child's condition, Aunt Jose, pale with terror, carried her to the hospital. There, the girl was taken from her arms and a dozen doctors and nurses, hectic and confused, began circling her. Aunt Jose saw the child leave behind a door she was not allowed to go through and then let herself fall to the floor, unable to support both herself and that cliff-like pain.

She was found there by her husband who was a sensible and judicious man, as men are used to pretending they are. He helped her stand up and reproached her for her lack of sense and hope. Her husband trusted medical science and spoke of it as others speak of God. Hence, he was troubled by how unreasonable his wife's position was, unable to do anything but cry and curse fate.

The girl was isolated in an intensive care unit. A white and clean place in which mothers could only stay half an hour each day. At that time it filled up with prayers and entreaties. All women made the sign of the cross over their child's face; they went over their bodies with reli-



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gious images and holy water, they asked of every God to let them live. Aunt Jose could hardly reach the cradle where her daughter barely breathed to ask her for something: "don't die." Afterwards she wept and wept, never drying her eyes nor moving until the nurses let her know she had to leave.

She again sat down on the benches near the door, her head on her lap, with no hunger or voice, resentful and surly, fervent and desperate. What could she do? What did her daughter have to live for? What offer would be good enough to interest her small body covered with needles and probes in remaining in this world? What could she say to her to convince her that it was worth it to make the effort rather than dying?

One morning, without knowing why, enlightened only by the ghosts in her heart, she approached the girl and started telling her stories from her ancestors. Who they had been, which women had knit their lives with

which men before her daughter's mouth and navel had formed a knot with her. What these women were made of, what toils they had been through, what sorrows and merriments she had inside her as her heritage. Who sowed, with boldness and fantasies, the life she was to continue.

For many days she remembered, imagined, invented. Each minute of each available hour she spoke endlessly into her daughter's ear. At last, one Thursday, as the sun was setting, while she was relentlessly telling some story, her daughter opened her eyes and looked at her, eager and defiant, as she would be for the rest of her long existence.

Aunt Jose's husband thanked the doctors, the doctors thanked their science's developments and the aunt held her child and left the hospital without saying a word. Only she knew everlastingly that no science was able to move as much as the one hidden in the coarse and subtle findings of other women with big eyes. ❧

Drawings by Lydia Peña

